

Winter 2017

# You can't walk where there is no ground

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## Recommended Citation

Stoller, P. (2017). You can't walk where there is no ground. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 7(3), 34-38. Retrieved from [https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/anthrosoc\\_facpub/69](https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/anthrosoc_facpub/69)

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SHORTCUTS

## You can't walk where there is no ground

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Early during my fieldwork among Songhay sorcerers in the Republic of Niger, I often tried to accelerate the pace of my education. Like most neophyte anthropologists, I had a limited amount of research time and a rapidly dwindling research budget. Would I be able to generate enough ethnographic data to complete my thesis and earn my doctorate?

My teacher, Adamu Jenitongo, had a very different view of how I should learn about Songhay sorcery. He insisted on teaching me at what seemed—to me, at least—a glacial pace. We routinely held our middle of the night study sessions in his spirit hut, a space that he filled with precious ritual objects—hatchets encased in red leather with bells attached to the hatchet heads; tiny sandals for the *Atakurma*, the elves of the bush; the sorcerer's *lolo* or staff of power, a four-foot iron pole also encased in red leather on to which a score of blood-caked rings, larger preceding smaller, had long ago been pushed into position. In this wondrously evocative setting that raised so many “important” questions, Adamu Jenitongo insisted that we take very small steps onto the path of Songhay sorcery. Typically, we might take up several lines of an incantation—for perhaps twenty minutes.

Well, that's enough for now, he'd say. Come back tomorrow night.

But, Baba, I need to know what those lines mean, I insisted.

He'd laugh. You're always in such a hurry. It takes time to learn these things. I'm building for you a foundation, Paul, and we need to make sure it's as solid as the ground. It takes a long time to build a good foundation.

But I don't have the time.

Then you must be patient. When things are right, your path will open. Always remember this, my son: you can't walk where there is no ground.



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ISSN 2049-1115 (Online). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14318/hau7.3.002>



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This short essay is a plea for a slower anthropology in which we recognize—and debate—the foundational contributions of our disciplinary ancestors. As a young scholar, I didn't always have a penchant for the slow study of the anthropological classics. Indeed, before that fateful night when Adamu Jenitongo introduced me to the “you can't walk where there is no ground” proverb, I found the study of anthropological classics time-consuming, irrelevant, and annoying—something you had to “struggle through” on the path to an intellectual future. In graduate school, there was no shortage of what seemed dusty and deadly classics to read. When I studied linguistics, the professors insisted that we read Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique generale* ([1916] 2011), one of the driest, most tedious texts imaginable. Having digested that *texte classique*, we moved on to Leonard Bloomfield's *Language* ([1935] 1984), Nikolai Trubetzkoy's *Principles of phonology* (1969), and Roman Jakobson's *Selected writings* (1971–85). Having consumed the principal texts of structural linguistics, we dove into transformational grammar, making our way through Noam Chomsky's *Syntactic structures* ([1955] 1968) and *Aspects of the theory of syntax* (1964). When I moved over to social anthropology, a new crew of professors proved to be no less enthusiastic about the classics. We read Lewis Henry Morgan and Sir James Frazer. We discussed the fine points of Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), Firth's *We, the Tikopia* (1936), Radcliffe-Brown's *The Andaman Islanders* (1922) and Mauss' *The gift* ([1925] 2016). We explored the tangled bank of Gregory Bateson's iconoclastic thoughts in *Naven* (1958) and debated the whys and wherefores of Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of culture* (1934). We also read Lévi-Strauss, with special emphasis on *The elementary structures of kinship* ([1949] 1969) and *The savage mind* (1966). When it came time for me to take a Ph.D. qualifying exam on Africanist anthropology, my committee presented me a list of eighty titles to devour, many of them classics from British anthropology, including Meyer Fortes' (1949, 1959) books on the Tallensi of Ghana, Siegfried Nadel's (1942) volume on the Nupe of Nigeria, Mary Douglas' (1963) ethnography of the Lele of Congo, Audrey Richards' (1939) study of the Bemba in what is today Zimbabwe, not to forget Monica Wilson's venerable work *Good company* (1951) on the Nyakyusa of Tanzania. Because I had proposed to work in Francophone Africa, my committee insisted that I read many of the classics of French Africanist scholarship—Griaule's *Masques dogons* (1938), *Dieu d'eau (Conversations avec Ogotemelli)* (1948), and *Méthode de l'ethnographie* (1957), Leiris' *Afrique fantôme*, Dieterlen's *Essai sur la religion Bambara* (1951), and, of course, Rouch's *La religion et la magie Songhay* (1960).

By the time I arrived in Niger to begin field studies among the Songhay people, I possessed a broad knowledge of the classics in anthropology and linguistics, but had no firm idea how such knowledge might help me understand, let alone write about, the Songhay world. In the field, I collected data on kinship, patterns of economic exchange, elements of social change. I also observed Songhay spirit possession ceremonies and witnessed sorcerous rituals. I recorded Friday mosque sermons and taped-recorded the talk of spirits as they spoke through the bodies of their mediums. Deeply engaged in fieldwork, I rarely thought of all those anthropological classics that I had so diligently consumed.

Then late one night, Adamu Jenitongo, annoyed at my impatience, told me: you can't walk where there is no ground.

That moment began the slow evolution of my comprehension of things Songhay. Adamu Jenitongo taught me incantations and showed me the plants he used to heal people of both village (physical) and bush (spirit) illnesses. But he refused to explain how the incantations worked or where to find the plants. When I asked about these matters, he said:

Your path will open. I've given you the foundation of our work. I've pointed you in the right direction. If you're serious, you'll find your way. It will take time, but one day, when you're ready, you'll take what you've learned here and put it to work in your own life. Your mind, he said, will ripen with experience, and then and only then will you understand the world.

At the time, I didn't completely understand his message. As the Songhay like to say, the mind ripens—albeit slowly—with age. In my case, years of conducting field research in West Africa and New York City, years of thinking about sorcery and the limits of the possible and years of confronting serious illness have brought to the surface a few central principles about the acquisition and custodianship of Songhay knowledge. These are insights that have gradually emerged from the foundation that Adamu Jenitongo long ago set for me.

1. The young mind is nimble, quick and energetic. It is ready to learn fundamentals that construct a foundation of knowledge.
2. As we age, the mind becomes ready to better understand what we have learned. It is ready to put that knowledge into practice.
3. Elders are the masters of their practices, but also the custodians of knowledge.
4. The elders' greatest obligation is to preserve and refine that knowledge and then pass it on to practitioners in the next generation, who will preserve and refine the knowledge in their own way.

This slow and wise West African epistemology has been the foundation of my anthropological practice. In hindsight, I am grateful to my teachers who long ago required me to read, think, and write about the anthropological classics. Like all classics, they are imperfect. They mostly emerged from colonial contexts that underscore a sullied past of political, social, and racial injustice. Despite these imperfections, however, these are texts, to paraphrase Lévi-Strauss, that are “good to think with.” As such, they are texts that remain open to the world. They constitute, at least for me, a foundation from which anthropologists can continue to build a strong disciplinary edifice. Through this process we change our practices and refine our thoughts, all while taking custody of the knowledge we are charged to preserve. Once preserved and refined, we set it as the foundation for the next generation of scholars, who, in turn, take up the obligation to continue the practice.

I like to say that I sit on the shoulders of my mentors—Jean Rouch and Adamu Jenitongo. Everything I have written is a testament to the foundation they carefully set for me. And yet my path, which emerges from their thoughts and practices, is not their path. This foundation—of classical knowledge, classical practices, and classical texts—marks a beginning not an end. Rooted in the knowledge that we are



part of a venerable tradition, we are not alone as we set out in various directions to find our way in an increasingly complex and troubled world.

If an edifice has no foundation, it crumbles.

You can't walk where there is no ground.

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